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ABSTRACT

This practice-application digest addresses what vocational education can do to reduce the almost 30 percent dropout rate among U.S. students. The first section describes factors that place students at risk, focusing on factors included in the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's definition of the term "at-risk." In the next section, the digest cites research that indicates vocational instruction compares favorably to the characteristics of nine model dropout prevention programs; however, vocational educators should motivate at-risk students by shifting their programs from a subject-focused to a career-focused curriculum. The document lists the set of characteristics shared by successful dropout prevention programs and describes two program models (the school-within-a-school program and the integrated learning environment). The key components of successful dropout prevention programs (development of administrative, community, family, and funding support and development of a program geared toward the special needs of at-risk students) and a citation for detailed recommendations in the literature are included. Recommendations for structuring classrooms offer practical advice on teaching style, curriculum, students' learning style, classroom organization and management, and evaluation and assessment. The document includes four references. (CML)

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RETAINING AT-RISK STUDENTS IN CAREER AND VOCATIONAL EDUCATION

Statistics indicate that almost 30 percent of students entering high school will leave prior to graduation. Urban dropout rates often range between 40 and 50 percent. Estimates place the nationwide costs of the dropout problem at a minimum of $26,000 for each dropout during his or her working life (Tindall 1988). This practice application **Digest** lists the factors that place students at risk of dropping out, examines the characteristics of successful programs in career and vocational education for secondary at-risk students, and presents recommendations for enhancing teacher and program effectiveness to motivate at-risk youth.

Factors that Place Students at Risk

The Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction's definition of the term "at-risk" is one of the most comprehensive. It lists 14 factors that place students in serious jeopardy of dropping out, including the following: being one or more years behind their grade level in reading or math (in grades K-8) or three or more credits behind their age/grade level in credits earned toward graduation (in grades 9-12); being chronically truant; being a school-age parent; having a history of personal and/or family drug and alcohol abuse; having parents who have low expectations for their child's success or who place little value on education; being a victim of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse; experiencing a family trauma (such as death or divorce); being economically, culturally, or educationally disadvantaged; and coming from a family with a history of dropouts. Additional risk factors include low intelligence test scores, low self-concept and social maturity, feelings of alienation, and certain types of handicaps and limiting conditions (Tindall 1988).

The Role of Career and Vocational Education in Motivation

Weber (1988) compares vocational and nonvocational instruction from the standpoint of nine characteristics of model dropout prevention programs. The model program characteristics considered are as follows: teachers with the authority to design courses and experiences; low teacher-pupil ratio; teachers attuned to students' needs; environment free from absenteeism, theft, and substance abuse; individualization; active role for students; recognition and special awards; emphasis on basic skills remediation; and emphasis on resolving students' personal problems. Weber finds that vocational education programs are more successful than nonvocational programs in regard to the first seven of these. Only in the latter two areas does Weber conclude that vocational education must do a better job.

A career-focused curriculum has been proposed as one effective strategy for making instructional programs relevant to at-risk students and thus motivating them to remain in school. Vocational educators can shift their programs from a subject-to a career-focused curriculum by (1) conscious and planned facilitation of the school-to-work transition and (2) provision of a rich set of experiential and cooperative learning opportunities that socialize students to the workplace (Fennimore 1988).

Characteristics of Successful Programs

Successful programs share a common set of characteristics related to general organization, staffing, and instruction (Tindall 1988). Such programs are generally presented in contexts that differ from a "traditional" school environment and function somewhat autonomously. Classrooms have low teacher-pupil ratios. Teachers tend to have a special commitment to their programs' philosophies and goals; they are able and willing to establish relationships with their students that go beyond the conventional teacher-student relationship. Teachers devote about half their time to students' remediation needs, about one-fourth to their personal needs, and about one-fourth to their work-related needs. Persuasive motivational strategies and individualized teaching and learning are also used.

Two program models that deserve special mention are the school-within-a-school program and the integrated learning environment. A school-within-a-school program functions best when it includes no more than 25-100 students working with 2-6 faculty members. These programs feature face-to-face relationships; extensive individualized and personalized instruction; teachers who are willing to assume an extended role in which they deal with students' home, community, and personal problems when necessary; a formal application procedure and insistence that students entering the program make a commitment to it; heavy emphasis on basic skills; and clear objectives, prompt feedback, and concrete evidence of progress (Tindall 1988).

In the integrated learning environment model, vocational instruction is provided in an environment in which students, educators (teachers, administrators, and counselors), the business community, parents, and the community at large are viewed as partners in an open and interconnected learning community. In order to increase its relevance to students, classroom instruction is coordinated with career education, paid work experience, and community service. Relationships between students and teachers stress shared goal setting and decision making, teamwork, group participation, and supportive leadership. Fennimore (1988) presents detailed guidelines for developing and implementing a program for at-risk students.

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Recommendations for Program Development

Tindall (1988) identifies five key components of successful programs for keeping at-risk students in school: (1) administrative support, (2) community support, (3) family support, (4) funding support, and (5) development of a program geared toward the special needs needs of at-risk students. He recommends the following actions:

- o Develop a K-12 approach to retaining at-risk students
- o Encourage creativity and ownership of programs, involve staff members in planning and decision making, and create a flexible management style
- o Involve community-based organizations, develop business-education partnerships with local employers, and coordinate approaches with other service providers (Private Industry Councils, community service organizations, health and human service organizations, and religious institutions)
- o Assist families in dealing with problems related to family relationships, abuse and neglect, substance abuse, and low self-esteem and apathy
- o Use a multiple funding approach and apply for funding from federal and state legislative programs pertaining to job training, vocational and adult education, special education, literacy, juvenile justice and delinquency, and so forth, as appropriate

Tindall provides detailed recommendations regarding identifying, recruiting, retaining, and assessing at-risk students; developing and/or improving prevocational programs; and implementing vocational programs geared toward the unique needs of at-risk students.

Recommendations for Structuring Classrooms

Eschenmann (1989) presents a set of practical recommendations for vocational educators to use in structuring their classrooms to meet the needs of at-risk students. His recommendations are grouped into the following five categories.

Teaching Style

Use a student-centered approach. Design classroom activities to build on individual student strengths, interests, needs, and desires while meeting stated program goals. Be a positive role model for students. Demonstrate confidence, competence, respect for students, and trust. Offer encouragement.

Curriculum

Explain the curriculum so that students know what it entails. Be sure that the curriculum challenges all of the students in the class regardless of their ability so that students can feel that they are achieving in meaningful activities. Use a variety of in- and out-of-school activities that are coordinated to meet both the educational goals of the program and the students' needs, interests, and expectations. Vary daily activities to increase student motivation and productivity.

Students' Learning Style

Ascertain how much and what kind of learning has already taken place. State educational objectives clearly so that students can have a clear understanding of what they are expected to learn before they apply their own learning styles to accomplish the objectives set for them.

Classroom Organization and Management

Strive to keep every student involved in activities that are relevant to his or her needs and tied to clearly stated educational objectives. Do not interrupt a student's task once activities have been assigned, and never assign a second activity before the first one has been completed. Organize the classroom so that a variety of activities can be conducted at the same time by students working in small groups.

Evaluation and Assessment

Develop a comprehensive evaluation and assessment system that includes a separate testing plan for each type of student activity. Identify a variety of different test items and techniques to match the range of abilities of the students in the class. Use a variety of testing situations, and test when the situation calls for it rather than at preset intervals. Select evaluation instruments to complement the types of activities that students have used to master the skills being covered.

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